







## 11. the urban corridor plan

METRO's transit investments in Houston's diverse neighborhoods could bring a significant improvement in mobility and quality of life – if market forces are balanced with neighborhoods' long-term vision; and if public and private sector investment are coordinated and leveraged for maximum benefit to the community. This will need a fresh look at the way decisions are made about public investments and how to involve the community in those decisions. Thus, the Urban Corridors' Planning process has been defined as an opportunity to think holistically about the future of the city through a process that is inclusive, integrated and accountable.

To address this need, Mayor Bill White authorized the Planning and Development Department and Planning Commission to initiate the Urban Corridors planning process in June 2006.

This process allows citizens to influence the future of their growing community by asking basic questions: What should change, and what should stay the same? What are the city's treasures? What needs greater attention? What areas need investment and what kind should it be? What will make the city competitive economically, protect the rich heritage, and enhance the quality of life? How should people get around, and what choices need to be added?

The outcome of the process will be a policy framework to encourage new private development and public infrastructure to produce a more walkable and attractive urban environment that reflects community desires. The City will formulate public infrastructure standards, urban design guidelines, and development ordinances that would be recommended to City Council for adoption. These tools would help the City guide its own investments in the transit corridors, shape private investments, and protect neighborhoods as well.

METRO's accelerated implementation schedule and approach of using design-build-operate-maintain contracts with private sector facility providers highlighted the need for the City to quickly move the Urban Corridors planning process along.

The City's initial step was to convene the Urban Corridors Steering Committee comprised of several representatives from existing leadership groups along all the lines. Since June, the Steering Committee has met almost every week. At the same time, the Planning Commission structured several committees of representative citizens and business interests to address issues related to urban growth and mobility.

The Planning Commission subcommittee on Mixed Use / Transit-Oriented Development was charged with tracking the Urban Corridors Project and has been regularly briefed on the issues and progress.



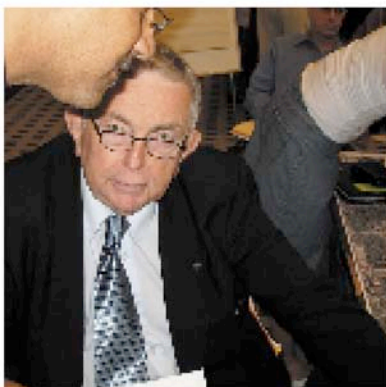




## The Steering Committee Process

The Steering Committee's first assignment was to set clear, specific objectives to guide and evaluate the process. The following list was established based on the underlying assumption that the goal is to help the community capitalize on METRO's investment, not influence decision making on the alignments.

1. Empower stakeholders to envision and influence the future of their neighborhoods—be they residential, commercial, or a mix of both- in the face of Houston's projected growth
2. Educate the community on the relationship between neighborhood stabilization and revitalization, redevelopment and public infrastructure
3. Excite the community about the positive opportunities associated with walking, cycling and transit
4. Establish support for future ordinances and guidelines to revitalize urban corridors and create pedestrian and bicycle friendly places
5. Initiate the urban corridors planning process, starting with METRO's transit corridors
6. Generate plans, ordinances, standards and incentives that help produce the type of communities envisioned by the citizens. Do not address land use per se, but shape the character of public realm and the way the private development interacts with it.
7. Demonstrate the ability to plan accountably, meet schedules and create certainty for the development community



Timelines and requirements for the process would have to be coordinated between METRO, the Houston Planning and Development Department, Public Works and Engineering Department, and the Urban Corridor Steering Committee. A master flowchart showing the relationships between the various processes (See Appendix) became the powerful tool that helped formulate the approach.

Ultimately, the work program was organized into three phases:

Phase I framed the overall effort, convened a community-wide steering committee that met every week for two months, and held a community-wide workshop on August 26th, attended by 240 citizens plus 50 volunteers. The results of Phase I are the subject of this report.

Phase II & III will build on Phase I, commence in November 2006, and will produce individual plans and implementation framework for each of the corridors based on on-going community engagement and dialogue. Each plan will address land development, mobility, public spaces' design and other community priorities. These will result in specific public policy recommendations as well as modification to City ordinances and standards. Phase II & III will be jointly funded by METRO, City, and Main Street Coalition.





## Steering Committee Deliberations

In the course of setting objectives, framing a work program and organizing the community workshop, the Steering Committee had very long, serious conversations about the stresses and needs of the Houston community in the face of growth and change. The first item of concern was how to differentiate the specific transit alignment processes being led by METRO from the broader neighborhood visioning and planning represented by the City's effort. Ultimately it was decided that alignment decisions coming from the METRO process would be respected and would be treated as existing transportation infrastructure in the Urban Corridors plans. Some were concerned that it was too late to change the physical and psychological landscape of the community, others disagreed, and in the end, all were excited about the opportunity to make a difference and shape the community for the future.

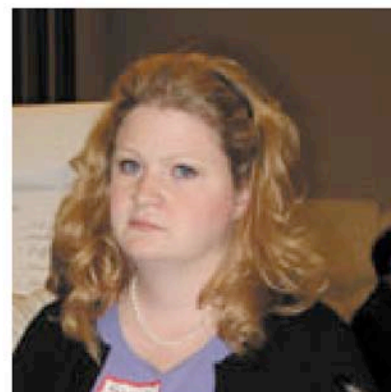
Some of the topics discussed over the hours and the weeks are highlighted here:

- The importance of creating an inclusive, transparent, and clearly accountable community process
- Short term vs. long-term decisions and strategies
- How to protect the treasured, stable neighborhoods
- How to decide what to save and what to change
- The community's fear of change and unfamiliarity with transit
- Houston's dearth of local models of walkable, compact mixed-use places
- The importance of including business and developer participants as well as neighborhood activists
- The transformation that can come from simply improving streets with sidewalks, landscaping, lighting, bike lanes, etc.
- The race against time as the City grows and develops without a clear vision, guidelines and incentives
- The competition between cities for jobs, investment, workers, and Houston's need to invest in better "quality of life" amenities
- The importance of mobility alternatives to address congestion as Houston grows minimize disruption and keep businesses healthy.

Early on, the Steering Committee decided it was important to notify the community of the process and involve them as quickly as possible in framing the issues. They scheduled a half-day workshop that would include both educational presentations and hands-on work sessions with the attendees. The goal for the session was to stimulate conversation about the future of Houston's urban neighborhoods, to establish key priorities, to determine the important features to keep or change, and to imagine how Houston should look and feel in the future.

## The Phase I Community Workshop

The Community Workshop took place on Saturday August 26, 2006 at the George R. Brown Convention Center. Open to the public, invitations were sent out to as broad an audience as possible. Steering committee members augmented City mailing lists with personal contacts and calls, City council members were asked to email constituents in the corridor study areas. Newspaper







articles and media public service announcements were used to reach businesses, residents, property owners and interested parties. Parking, registration and lunch were provided free of charge to attendees. Over 240 participants and about 50 volunteers attended.

The workshop began with opening comments from Planning and Development Director Marlene Gafrick on the inevitability of coming growth and the resultant challenges Houston faces. Planning Commission Chair Dr. Carol Lewis then described the Urban Corridors purpose and process. This was followed by a power point presentation on national urban trends and strategies to build competitive, successful cities presented by project consultants Marilee Utter and Tim Van Meter.



The presentations highlighted the profound demographic changes across the country, and their impact on cities. Aging, immigration, rising costs (time and money) of commuting, technology impacts, the move back to cities, sustainable communities, concerns about wellness and health, and demand for amenities are converging in trends for walkable neighborhoods, new housing choices and transportation alternatives. When delivered, quality of life improves dramatically and economic benefits to property owners and cities alike are irrefutable. In order to be competitive in the next generation, cities are going to have to deliver these special "places", and districts around transit stations offer a powerful opportunity. But creating these destination areas is not easy and will not happen without clear intention and will. The public realm is the first and most important element—how streets are designed makes a world of difference. Then requiring simple guidelines in the private development—where buildings sit on the block, how parking is handled, the street level experience for pedestrians—can positively transform otherwise non-descript or undesirable neighborhoods. To be successful, public private partnerships are essential. There are clear and essential roles for the public sector, the private sector and the not-for-profit sector to play in becoming champions for great cities. The cities that will thrive in the next decade live by Doug Porter's guiding principles: 1) Choices 2) Connections 3) Collaborations. (See Appendix 2 for copies of presentation.)



For the purposes of the participatory portion of the workshop that followed the presentations, Houston's inner core (mostly within the IH 610 loop) had been divided up into three large areas A, B & C. At registration, each attendee selected one of the three areas for participation and was assigned to a table workgroup. Ultimately there were 17 table workgroups (5 of Area A, 7 of Area B, 5 of Area C) comprised of 12 to 15 participants each.

Each workgroup was staffed by volunteer facilitators, designers and recorders. Each table was covered with a map approximately 4 feet by 6 feet in size that covered several square miles of the city, corresponding to the group's chosen area. Groups had approximately two hours to consider that area in light of community infrastructure and livability issues. Maps were diagrammed to reflect group concerns, comments were captured on flip charts by recorders, and each group summarized three primary concerns/comments. Volunteers were also given comment cards to submit if they had additional input. The large group then reconvened and a selected volunteer from each worktable reported back the top issues in their group. (Maps, flip chart notes and final Report Back notes are attached as appendices.)



Following the formal session, the volunteers debriefed on the session particulars. Their observations included the very high energy in the working groups and enthusiasm for the process, the surprising amount of congruence among diverse group members on how to make Houston more livable, and the desire of participants to get to the Phase II work at a smaller, neighborhood scale.